

### 3. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

**I** Jane Austen's world seems to be as far away from Stendhal's as is possible. Here one breathes a totally different air. The language is that of reason rather than of sentiment, virtue rather than sincerity, and moderation rather than daring. Accommodation to the social order is inevitably preferred to the Continental's criminality. All attachments are directed to marriage and fidelity to the marriage contract. Neither the adulteress nor the seduced maiden is justified, although they may be the objects of sympathy—a very qualified sympathy. Everyone is held to standards of duty and morality, and individual responsibility is the incessant theme of her novels. And in her world, duty and morality are not the subject of complicated or sophisticated interpretation. They are the results of principles that every tolerably well raised ten-year-old knows—obedience to the law, honesty, respect for one's parents, loyalty to friends, and gratitude to benefactors. The admirable qualities in Jane Austen's world sound like a list of contraries to the list one finds in Stendhal. Jane Austen is the steadfast defender of *bon sens* against self-expression and commitment. These characteristics are present so consistently and insistently that Jane Austen can appear to some to be a defender of conventional morality against the rights of individuality and to others as a partisan of Aristotelian rationalism against the dominant principles of modernity.

Any personage in her novels who presents the charms of the Romantic hero or heroine or who feels, does, or expresses extreme things is cast in a negative light. The acceptable emotional range in

Jane Austen is very limited, to say the least, compared with French or Russian novelists. There are bad people but none of the monsters that one finds in Stendhal, Balzac, or Dostoyevsky. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* is thoroughly disagreeable and contemptible, but more weak than evil, certainly no highway robber or murderer. And the other bad persons suffer from vices like envy, jealousy, snobbism, and too great a concern with money. All of them are normal parts of respectable country life.

Nothing much really happens in Austen's novels. The action is confined to the quest for mates and the more or less successful outcomes of such quests. There are no politics, no conspiracies, no high crimes, no wars. In *Pride and Prejudice* soldiers play a certain role, but that there is a great war on with Napoleon, or that these men might be called upon to fight and die, is at best hinted at. The only reference to the grand politics of the day, the memory of which is for Julien Sorel the great scene against which he measures his own deeds and ambitions, is that the "peace" caused the disbanding of the military units in the Bennets' neighborhood (III.19).<sup>\*</sup> The soldiers and their uniforms are introduced only for their sexual attractiveness, to show the frivolousness of some girls, in particular Lydia Bennet. The good men, Bingley and Darcy, seem to have in no way participated in the great political and ideological events of the day. Austen's horizon is so narrow and cramped that one might accuse her of being simply feminine, unable to recognize or appreciate politics, war, and the movement of great ideas. The alternatives presented are impoverished compared with those presented by Stendhal. Religion is present in the person of the ridiculous Mr. Collins, but it is only part of the scenery, neither a great enemy nor a great hope.

What we have is a class of country gentry who do absolutely nothing. Mr. Gardiner has a business, and he is in that regard an outstanding exception. Everyone else has an income of one kind or another that permits him or her to live more or less comfortably without working. The Bennets are not wealthy, but they have a house that would appear to be a palace to contemporary homeowners, and they have three servants. The time of this class is spent in passing time, visiting one another (a six-week visit is considered insultingly short by Lady Catherine de Bourgh), letter writing, playing cards, unenlightening conversation, gossip, and, above all, endless matchmaking. Austen seems calmly to accept what would

<sup>\*</sup> All parenthetical citations in this chapter are to volume and chapter of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

appear to Stendhal to be an unheroic bourgeois life, the hatred of which animates his literary career. The great heroic models are simply absent from the consciousness of her personages and are not regretted. This is the life that for Stendhal justifies rebellion and despair. In short, Jane Austen's world, when one comes to *Pride and Prejudice* fresh from *The Red and the Black*, is boring. But when one actually reads Austen, the intensity and excitement are as great as or greater than what one discovers in other writers. It is a kind of miracle, but the fate of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet in their relations to Bingley and Darcy engages us. Stripped of all external drama, the history of the heart as presented by Austen is endlessly fascinating.

The excitement of these stories is accompanied by the laughter Jane Austen provokes in her readers. It is the laughter produced by irony. One thing all critics agree upon is that Jane Austen's prevailing tone is ironical. In a gentle way, she ridicules practically everything, not only the pretensions of inferior persons like Mr. Collins or the Bingley sisters with their concerns for money and place, but also the self-deceptions of her protagonists, and even the hopes and expectations attendant upon the marriages that seem to be their fulfillment. And it is this irony that perhaps most links her to the classical tradition. Real irony has a lot to do with the virtue missing in modern thought, moderation. It is the tone of superiority politely exposing inferiority without wounding it, leaving things in their place while nevertheless understanding them. It is a certain art of deception, the mode of radical thought that accepts conventional life while itself remaining free. Irony flourishes on the disproportion between the way things are and the way they should be while accepting the necessity of this disproportion. It is a classical style because the ancients did not expect that reality could become rational. Stupidity they thought to be inexpugnable. Moderation, rather than being the expression of a timid or easygoing soul, was for them the expression of one who has overcome hope and therefore indignation. The reserve that one finds in Jane Austen, which Leo Strauss has compared to that of Xenophon,<sup>1</sup> is a result not of simple-mindedness or naïveté but of an awareness of nuance and a contempt for vulgar sophistication. It obscures superiority in an egalitarian world rather than trumpeting superiority and complaining about its lack of recognition. It is the means of maintaining proportion in an essentially unchanging and unchangeable world. In short, irony seems to presuppose the distinction between theory and practice, and is far away from *praxis*, that recent invention which is neither one nor the other. Socrates is the ironical figure *par excellence* and always appears

to lack sincerity or good faith, the new virtues of a later age. The aggravating conventionality of Jane Austen's mind reflects her aggravating acceptance of the conventional life and goals of the world she portrays. She does not rebel against the idle, propertied class that she depicts, nor does she try to liberate women from their humiliating dependence on men. But she does make us laugh at these things, indicating that there is much joy and strength to be gained simply from knowing. This perspective is largely absent in the Romantics. This woman who writes exclusively of the relation between male and female, and who, as a writer, is nothing but a matchmaker, was herself a spinster, and none the worse for it. Stendhal seems to envy the young and beautiful Julien; Austen does not seem to envy the successes of her heroines. Austen represents and justifies reason and leisure in human affairs when they are in short supply and without much honor in literature and life. She is like Socrates, who appears hopelessly conventional and moralistic to Thrasymachus, with whom he ironizes, while he actually knows everything Thrasymachus knows, and much more, and goes well beyond Thrasymachus' strong critique of justice. But he is angry neither at the fact of injustice nor at Thrasymachus. A decent respect for the perhaps illusory convictions of men who are at least partly decent is his mode, a mode that protects him as well as these men and gets more to the heart of things. Rather than railing at stupidity and boasting, comedy does best to treat them with the greatest apparent respect, as does Socrates in both Plato's and Xenophon's account of him. This is also Jane Austen's mode.

Irony is a branch of humor that has declined continuously since the end of the eighteenth century, and the very word has become almost meaningless—think of an expression like "a tragic irony" or "an ironic twist." I have used the term "irony" in relation to Stendhal when he laughs at his major actors. But this was perhaps too loose a usage. Stendhal loves to shock; Jane Austen avoids it. Stendhal sees only what is wrong with conventions; Austen tries to see what is sound in them. Stendhal really only ridicules rather than ironizes. His rebelliousness and indignation are too great to permit contemplative distance, which is a precondition of irony. Irony disappears when revolutionary politics triumph. The possibilities of truly fundamental change and the writer's conviction that he might contribute to it tend toward humorlessness. Moreover, the writer is inclined to regard himself as part of his age and its movements, denying the speculative distance that earlier writers believed they had attained.

In all these respects Austen seems a part of an older world and far away from the one founded by Rousseau and his followers. But it would be misleading to leave it at that. The centrality and even sacredness of marriage for all of her novels indicates a certain connection with Rousseau's reform of the novel. Much more, the importance of the assent of the sentiments and of love itself, neither of which is simply rational, makes Jane Austen's sobriety appear to be a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, the Romantic quest. There is very much that is sensible and reasonable in Rousseau's view of marriage in *Emile*, and Stendhal's was not the only way for the novelist to go once he or she had fallen under Rousseau's influence. Certainly Jane Austen mutes the effusiveness of lovers, although it is there, for example, when Darcy can finally let himself go. Sympathy for an adulteress, which is the theme of the other three novels we are treating, is simply beyond her reach. But the principle she would and does invoke for rejecting such sympathy is one that Rousseau would surely endorse: a woman should freely choose her husband, but when she has chosen, she must stick by her choice. This woman's freedom to choose is Rousseauian, and it was not a right universally recognized at the time. Moreover, for Austen that choice had to be made on the basis of real love, which she admits is a result of inclination, not reason.

A truly classical view of marriage can be found in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* where everything is decided reasonably by the husband without concern for love.<sup>2</sup> The only considerations are those of utility relating to the common work or task of the married couple in running the household and raising the children. Austen brings passionate love to marriage where the classical moralists never encouraged it. It was not that they simply rejected or despised love in marriage, but that it got in the way of being reasonable. They appear to have said: be reasonable first and love might follow later. Certainly the virtues of the partners would concern those who determine the match, but they would not insist that those virtues be lovable. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Jane Austen than the arranged marriage, whereas for Aristotle it would probably be the preferred mode of matching a couple. In Jane Austen the parents are distinctly unwise, and this is another sign of the Romantic element in her. Her heroines' ways of asserting their wills against their parents are very different from the characteristically Romantic rebellion, but the assertion of the will is nonetheless essential. Parents are not privy to the sentiments that constitute love in their children. Austen's heroes must think through their attractions and tend not to have the expe-

rience of *le coup de foudre*, but this thinking through is an attempt to ascertain the genuineness and seriousness of the sentiments rather than to discover whether having such sentiments is reasonable. Jane Austen would never insist on the illusoriness of love, and she always underpins love with solid supports like property and proof of fixed character.

Nevertheless, like Rousseau she believes that sexual love—and there are plenty of indications that Jane Austen knows a great deal about sexual attraction—ought to be directed toward the virtue of the partner, and courtship is an attempt by each to discover those virtues in the other. The greatest betrayal of the seriousness of the relationship would be to decide about marriage on the basis of mere sexual attraction. The adjustment of the sexual passion to the love of virtue is for Jane Austen the central question, as it is for Rousseau, and the wholly unclassical expectation of these novels is that one's beloved will be one's best friend or that marriage is itself the essential friendship. By contrast, the unerotic and uninstitutionalized character of friendship is fully expressed in Aristotle's *Ethics* and Montaigne's "Of Friendship." Jane Austen presents a reasonable picture of what may be an unreasonable hope, that is, the harmonious union of sexual desire with love, marriage, and friendship.

## II

The very title, *Pride and Prejudice*, indicates that the involvement of the two lovers, Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, is powered by the psychology of *amour-propre*. The misunderstandings between the two have to do with a struggle for recognition and preeminence. Each becomes interesting to the other because he or she is not a pushover. Contempt and resentment, or opinions about the other's opinions, determine the attachment while impeding it. Elizabeth's problem with Darcy, that he is condescending to her because of the prejudice of his superior wealth, is exactly the same one that Sophie has with Emile at the outset of their romance, and the happy resolution of their affairs can come to pass only when Elizabeth and Sophie are persuaded that their opinion about their suitors' prejudice of wealth is only their own prejudice. Pride is evidently understood to be a vice, particularly by those who think they are victims of Darcy's or anyone else's alleged high self-esteem, but that self-esteem is essential to both Darcy's and Elizabeth's strong characters as well as to their capacity to get along with

each other. Each claims to despise other people's opinions; but actually they are both extremely sensitive to the opinions of those they might get romantically involved with or whom they consider to be worthy judges of themselves. There is a delicate balance between the need for self-esteem and the need for the esteem of others, and neither can be sacrificed to the other. This unavowed and perhaps unconscious concern for the good witness of the person one admires is an important mechanism in the most profound sociality, the love between men and women. Elizabeth's extremely amusing father lacks sufficient concern for the opinions of others, and this is a real weakness in him. Rousseau makes a distinction between pride and vanity, but only on the basis of the relative greatness of the objects envisioned by the two dispositions. Elizabeth's pedantic sister Mary says that vanity concerns the opinions of others whereas pride concerns one's opinion of oneself (I.5). This makes sense, but it is not true. The proud persons in this novel, Darcy and Elizabeth, worry very much about what the other thinks. What distinguishes them from Mr. Collins, who is a weathervane, is that everything he is is constituted by his adaptation to the opinions of his conventional superiors, whereas Darcy and Elizabeth pride themselves on their independence of such opinions. Elizabeth's passionate rejection of Darcy's first proposal is a remarkable self-assertion, a refusal of one of the most eligible bachelors in the whole of England by a girl of no position and no means. This is extremely impressive, but it surely depends on her opinion of what his opinion of her is. She cannot tolerate the belief she attributes to him that he is marrying beneath himself. In this scene she is a little like Julien Sorel, strong but self-deluded as to her independence and indifference. She lacks too much self-knowledge to be proud in her sense. The action of the novel helps her to attain self-knowledge. Together the couple and each of its members will be proud.

Darcy, for his part, plays the role of a Romantic hero in the grip of a destructive passion he cannot control. He hides from himself his dependence on Elizabeth by trying to despise her while making a desperate suit to her. "I shouldn't be doing this, and your situation makes you unworthy of me, but you will be gratified to know that I cannot do without you." This is in sum what Darcy says to her, and it certainly provides grounds for rejecting him. But a person wiser than Elizabeth was at that moment would have recognized how purely defensive it was. Elizabeth's vulnerability makes her respond in such a way as to correct the disproportion between their situations by insisting that what she brings naturally is of ever so much more

worth than what he brings conventionally. All of this is misunderstanding, which the reader quickly realizes will be set right. The clarification of the misunderstandings will be an education for both and make it possible for them to be together harmoniously forever.

The importance of Elizabeth's *amour-propre* for her romantic attachment is highlighted by her relationships with the two other men who make some kind of claim on her attention. The first is Mr. Collins, who is persuaded that Elizabeth will be delighted to marry him because he thinks himself charming, because he is on the way to a great and lucrative career in the Church, because he is patronized by Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a superior being who also happens to be Darcy's aunt, and because he will inherit the Bennet house when Mr. Bennet dies and expects that Elizabeth will want to keep it in the family. She rejects his suit with ridicule and contempt. She is not angry that someone to whom she is not attracted has the nerve to sue for her hand, but is disgusted by his vanity and lack of real feeling. Within a couple of days this great lover finds someone else. Elizabeth is completely indifferent to Collins and whatever opinion he might have of her, and is therefore an accurate judge of his character and motives. She is a bit like her detached father, who carries on a continuous correspondence with Mr. Collins because the latter's stupidity delights him. The second suitor is Mr. Wickham, who is charming, graceful, and attractive. Elizabeth to some degree seems to fall under the spell of his erotic appeal. He is very good-looking, dances well, and is gallant with ladies. She appreciates his apparent preference for her among all the eligible girls of the neighborhood. She also too easily believes his calumnies about Darcy. She has no reason to resist Wickham's opinions as she does Darcy's, and she is only too glad to have ammunition in her assault on Darcy, who has insulted her. She unabashedly flirts with Wickham, for her a harmless diversion. There is no risk involved, for Elizabeth is beyond the temptation of physical attraction when there is no spiritual force accompanying it. Her relationship with Wickham is at best an amusing pastime, and she feels no pain or resentment when he lightly turns his attention elsewhere. In both of these cases, her instinct and her reasoning are perfect. She is perhaps too ready to believe Wickham's falsehoods, but this is a result of a combination of inexperience of vice and anger at Darcy.

In the gripping drama of Darcy's first proposal and her furious rejection of it, she gives a mixture of good and bad reasons to justify her rejection. She has discovered that Darcy has played a critical role in preventing his friend Bingley from marrying her beloved and truly

wonderful elder sister, Jane. He has done so on two grounds, her horrible family and Jane's apparent indifference to Bingley. The connection with the Bennets is evidently unsuitable in Darcy's eyes, although he himself seeks such a connection. But he does so, as he believes, out of an almost tragic necessity. And he can interpret Jane's motives as stemming out of the desire only for a comfortable situation. Both reasons actually have a certain basis in fact. Elizabeth has herself criticized Jane for not expressing her attraction to Bingley more openly. Jane's reticence is due to good taste and modesty, but the misinterpretation is an excusable one. Moreover, Elizabeth's family is, with the exception of Jane and Elizabeth, indeed rather repulsive. We have had ample opportunity to see this with our own eyes, and their behavior at Bingley's ball was mortifying to Elizabeth herself. Their mother is mindless, social-climbing, tasteless, and without any self-control. The three younger sisters are each in her own way equally unappealing. They appear to be a tight band of marriageable predators. Even Mr. Bennet, who is so bright and witty, from the point of view of severe virtue can be understood to be irresponsible and even frivolous. Elizabeth has experienced that most excruciating of pains for a decent person, being ashamed of one's family, being ashamed of one's shame, and the disagreeable uncertainty whether the criticism is in fact justified or is merely an acceptance of the conventional opinions of others. This ambiguity is in Darcy himself. It is not clear whether his strictures stem from the merely social unacceptability of the Bennets, or a real insight into their inferiority. His relative, Catherine de Bourgh, is at least as vulgar as any of the Bennets, and compounds her vulgarity with abuse of her high station. And however different the cases, Darcy's sister agrees to an elopement with Wickham, as does Lydia. A part of Darcy's education in this novel is his coming to clarity about this issue. But Elizabeth responds with the angry defense of her own relations in a way characteristic of proud persons. Aristotle says that a gentleman is ironic to inferiors and insolent to superiors.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Elizabeth is very much a gentleman.

The second objection to Darcy is his mistreatment of Wickham, whom he is alleged to have cheated out of his rightful inheritance as determined by Darcy's father in his love for his godson. Here the charge is not only pride or prejudice but strictly immoral conduct. Darcy appears to be not only a man contemptuous of others because he is born to high position but also simply a bad man, a breaker of faith and a moral hypocrite.

There is no doubt that Elizabeth believes what she says to Darcy

and is truly indignant at his behavior, but her indignation masks the fact that these are only excuses for her dislike of Darcy. Collins' manners are at least as bad, but the passions of her soul do not combine in a passionate attack on him. With him she is objective and detached, or, at most, irritated. But with Darcy she is enraged because of his hold over her, the fact that his opinion really does count. She must make him think that it does not and that she is really independent of him. She has to get to him. If he thinks she is independent, maybe she will be able to believe that she is independent. She is the wrathful Achilles insulting her general Agamemnon. The real objection to Darcy is his taking her for granted and the hopeless inferiority that a marriage with him would entail. All the power is in his hands, and his only attachment to her appears to be an uncontrollable attraction without the support of either the conventional standards or a reverence for her virtue. Throughout a marriage that began in this way, he would have the advantage in every disagreement, for she would merely be a siren who entrapped him counter to all the good reasons for permanent moral attachment. Her accusations help her to avoid admitting the less than noble reasons for her resentment. Her education in the novel is learning to accept her dependence. Marriage between these two savages requires the acceptance by each of slavery to the other, while each thinks that he or she ought to be the master. Elizabeth would never marry a man whom she considered her inferior, while she hates a man who considers himself her superior. Equality of the partners would seem to be the answer, and it is. But the establishment of equality between two strong-willed individuals is not such an easy thing and probably requires each to think the other is superior. The fact is that Elizabeth would very much like to marry Mr. Darcy, and she must only persuade herself that she is taming her own will rather than being tamed by Darcy and that Darcy requires her for substantial and enduring reasons. The correctives to pride and prejudice, and progress in self-knowledge, result from the combative engagement of these two doubting warriors.

Darcy, in turn, responds immediately to the real humiliation that Elizabeth has succeeded in dealing him. He feels for the first time in his life that he must explain himself, not to the world at large but to this Elizabeth whose judgment has become authoritative for him. This reveals Darcy's real defect. It is not that he is not a virtuous man, but that his is a savage virtue, that is, an austere and harsh discipline that needs no explanation to others. Austen's virtuous characters, particularly males, are not the most agreeable or sociable

of beings. The seductive Wickham and the easygoing Bingley are too sociable, and this means they are to be taken less seriously. Real virtue, as opposed to the accommodating social virtue of modern man, is at a certain tension with agreeableness. It involves taking virtue very seriously and the recognition that virtuous behavior and character are rare. A distasteful negative judgment, however well hidden, of most men and women is implicit in the virtuous person's conduct. That prickly and unsociable side of virtue is something that writers like Hobbes or Molière, eager above all to further peaceful relations among men, tried to suppress. Rousseau says that the misanthrope, whose truthfulness wins him so many enemies, is a virtuous man and that in ridiculing him Molière is really ridiculing virtue. Rousseau deplores the mean, utilitarian social virtue so effectively promoted by writers like Molière and Voltaire.<sup>4</sup> For the ancient writers on the other hand, virtue has two foci, one community harmony, the other individual perfection, which are not always in total harmony with each other. Balancing these two is difficult and requires rare taste and judgment, too unreliable a prescription for the modern theorists. They simply denied that pride is a virtue.

Given Austen's classical preferences, Darcy's difficult and somewhat unsociable comportment cannot be interpreted simply as a negative. But he carries it to extremes, and the need to explain himself to another forces him to explain himself to himself. This is the immediate effect Elizabeth has on him, and it is probably the deepest long-range effect it will have on him in their marriage. He is softened by the very fact of writing his explanatory letter. Its effect on Elizabeth is to make her think, forcing her to enter into the ambiguities of her feelings. The letter really settles the issue, and their marriage is the inevitable result of their each coming to understand the significance of the act of writing the letter as well as its content. She has to investigate the truth of his claims to virtue, and he has to recognize fully the meaning of his need to gain her good opinion even though he despises the quest for the good opinion of others. Virtue, he learns, is not so self-sufficient as he thought and requires the confirmation of valid judges. This reciprocal recognition is the heart of romance as Rousseau taught it.

Of course there are no wise governors for either Elizabeth or Darcy to guide them to the happy conclusion of their stormy courtship. There is no one to whom either can turn for advice or guidance. For various reasons, everyone else is beneath the comprehension of this true love. In this sense, Austen's novel is Romantic, depending on fateful chance to bring the ship safely into port. If Darcy had not

come home a day early, he and Elizabeth would not have had the opportunity for a new beginning; and if Darcy were not present when the news of Lydia's elopement with Wickham arrived, he would not have been able to perform the signal services that recommended him so strongly to Elizabeth and finally proved his good character to her. The happy ending is both necessary and incredible. So, in spite of all of her understatement, Austen is something of a romantic who believes that blind love has good eyes.

Throughout all of Austen's works the heroines are somehow self-generated. She discounts the authority and respectability of the parents, who are distinctly inferior beings, particularly from the point of view of wisdom or prudence. This is a sign of the unconventional or radical side of Austen's point of view. Her heroines fit into the conventional order, but that does not entirely disguise the unconventional grounds of the relationships. They are triumphs of nature over convention. She celebrates the victory of her heroines' wills. This is not to say that virtue is simply strength of will. There is an objective and permanent content to virtue, one that involves certain simple things like honesty, loyalty, and good sense. But to practice these virtues and make a life around them requires unusual strength, inasmuch as the real world is so hopelessly not so much corrupt as stupid and conventional.

Elizabeth's father is an excellent case in point because her relation to him is so subtle and they have so many things in common. They are both extremely witty and, in general, shrewd observers of others' follies. Mr. Bennet, disappointed in marriage and unable to have any sensible communication whatsoever with his coarse and silly wife, simply goes into an inner exile, spending all of his time in his library reading, and ironizing when members of his family force themselves on his attention. He is quite relaxed because he feels himself unable to improve his wife and children or to moderate their conduct. He ridicules them and everyone else incessantly and thus enjoys himself. This level of detachment is, at least in some ways, impressive. It participates in at least the appearance of self-sufficiency while providing a mirror in which one sees the absurdities of low seriousness. He can be said to be cruel to his wife and younger daughters, but they deserve it and also are so used to it that it hardly affects them. Mr. Bennet is a wonderful corrective to the reforming spirit, with its humorlessness, in families and nations. He is not inhuman and appreciates his two elder daughters, who are so decent and fine. He might be criticized for leaving the other three girls under their mother's influence, but he probably assessed his power relative to hers

and thought it impossible to counterbalance her. But, however charming Mr. Bennet's detachment, its godlike distance from the things that agitate most people is callous and perverse. Mr. Bennet is a charming dropout. He helps us to see people as they are, but he is not so helpful in understanding the virtuous. Darcy, too darkly serious about morality but therefore a serious man, judges Mr. Bennet harshly as frivolous and neglectful of the fundamental duties of a father, a husband, and the head of a household. Perhaps the most damning thing is the way he hurts both Jane and Elizabeth, especially when he ridicules Darcy without recognizing that Elizabeth is sensitive on this score. This proves that his habitual way of life has made him insensitive even where he does not wish to insult or make fun. Darcy's overseriousness can and will be corrected in his relationship with Elizabeth, but it is clearly closer to the gravity required for decent social life.

Elizabeth has her father's quick wit and lively awareness of the ridiculous, but she cares about people and the serious problems of life, and she can be hurt and be angry. She seeks happiness, as does any healthy human being. In Jane Austen's world, she is a much more perfect specimen than her father—although, to repeat, Mr. Bennet represents the wit that permeates Jane Austen's own writing and is rarely to be found in her personages. His two elder daughters escape the debasement of the social climbing, the shameless search for husbands, and the concern for money that dominate in the rest of the family, but this appears to be a result of their natures rather than parental nurture. Although Austen criticizes the lack of proper education in the Bennet family, Jane and Elizabeth, like so many of Austen's good characters, are self-made. This underlines her belief that nature is far more important than convention, even though she treats the framework of convention with great respect.

Marriage is the most significant of the conventions, but the successful marriage is really the triumph of nature over convention or the use of convention to support nature. The core of the good marriage is the friendship of two people who are attracted to each other and whose virtues are such as both to be admirable and to ensure the fidelity of the partners against temptation and in difficult times. The rules of the marriage relationship, especially with respect to property, can both corrupt and support the natural attraction depending upon the character of the individuals involved. Everybody gets the kind of marriage he or she deserves. The punishment of bad or foolish persons follows immediately from the character of their choice

of mates and situations. There is a ladder that goes from Lydia and Wickham at the bottom to Elizabeth and Darcy at the top, passing by way of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet (Mr. Bennet seems to have chosen Mrs. Bennet too much on the basis of good looks, which soon pass), Charlotte and Mr. Collins (Mr. Collins chooses on the basis of what will be most convenient and what will appeal to Lady de Bourgh), and Jane and Bingley. The stakes are human happiness, and people are more or less happy on the basis of their choice of a partner. Very few people have powerful erotic attractions and even fewer are faithful partisans of their attractions. In addition, even fewer persons love virtue. And fewest are those who have a discerning judgment about the character of others and what is fitting. The many have marriages, and hence human relationships, that exist only by law and public opinion. The few have substantial attachments that consist in continuous delight in the company of the other. Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins is tolerable only because she is able to arrange her husband's study in such a way that he is not tempted to come out and bother her, whereas Elizabeth wants to be with Darcy as much as she can.

This moral world, viewed superficially, is one of perfect order and justice. The good are rewarded and the bad punished. The high expectations of the central personages are apparently fulfilled. This general niceness could be cloying, not necessarily because we may have vicious tastes but because it does not seem to reflect the nature of things. However, the irony in Austen's books makes us aware that she is explicit only about the nice things, while things are not as harmonious as the surface presents them. The nice Jane Bennet could not be the heroine of one of Jane Austen's novels precisely because she is too nice. She, in a way that is infuriating to Elizabeth, refuses to recognize the nasty motivations of others and always gives them a favorable gloss. She does not recognize that Bingley's sisters' politeness is hypocritical, and that they wish to promote a marriage between Bingley and Darcy's sister in the ultimate hope that one of them will get Darcy. Austen punishes this genial vice in Jane by providing her with a husband who is a bit too weak and accommodating, not the kind of man who provokes ecstasies of admiration. The sharper and shrewder Elizabeth is aware of ambiguous motives and can see them even in herself. When she sees Darcy's magnificent estate, she feels what a wonderful thing it would be to be the mistress of all that (III.1). Austen does not insist on this point, but we have to wonder whether Elizabeth's love would have been as strong

or Darcy's so successful without the support of wealth and prominence. In this way, Austen is much harsher than is Stendhal, who shows true love manifesting itself against all such extraneous supports to love. The relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy does seem to be real and powerful, but Austen's pointing to this economic substrate gives us some pause. Her surface is that Xenophontic gentlemanly one, where one mentions only the nice things while hinting at the ones that are not so nice.<sup>5</sup> Modern taste is much more extreme, either reducing things to the lowest common denominator or insisting on a furious idealism. Austen evidently believes she is giving a more honest account of the complexity of human affairs, in which there is a mixture of high and low. Perhaps her position as a novelist outside of the marriage game that is her subject matter permits her relative clarity and freedom from self-deception.

Another example of Austen's pointing toward the ambiguities is Darcy's strenuous and successful efforts to put the best face on Lydia's elopement with Wickham. He says and believes that he tries to mitigate the unfortunate situation because he is responsible for Wickham's presence in their society and therefore, in all his moral rigor, for the elopement. This is duty, but he has no need to explain his conduct to others. One might however ask whether he acts so nobly not only out of a pure love of justice but also from a desire to impress Elizabeth. This incident is what conquers all her doubts about him and persuades her that she must have him. He did indeed make efforts to keep his role in the affair secret, but it did finally come out. Moreover, proving to himself that he deserved Elizabeth might well have been sufficient for him. These relations among men and women are a structure of stresses and balances that requires a sophisticated architecture to remain standing.

Elizabeth somehow recognizes this and she echoes Rousseau's views about the complementarity required to found a solid relationship between a man and a woman. Classical friendship is taught by Aristotle to be essentially a relationship between persons who are alike.<sup>6</sup> The friend is a kind of true mirror in which one can see oneself. By contrast, the friendship of a couple is founded on the imperfections or incompletenesses of each of the partners requiring complements or correctives from the others. Elizabeth wants Darcy to teach her all the things that a man's broader experience of the world, as well as his greater study of the arts and sciences, have brought him, while she can instruct him in tact and civilize his virtue (III.8). The aspiration to independence or self-sufficiency would de-

stroy this unity. They must be "made for each other." Male and female are much more rigidly distinct and unambiguously directed to each other than are the partners in either classical marriages or friendships. For Aristotle, marriage has the common ground of the material interests of the household, a common ground that hardly engages or exhausts the full capacities of the soul, whereas friendship at its peak consists in the common pursuit of the truth. From Aristotle's point of view, Austen's loves would be a halfway house, a mixture of elements that he separates in order to perfect.

But it is friendship that Austen celebrates. Friendship at its peak is for her between male and female whereas for Aristotle it was primarily between male and male. For him, what the female would bring would water down philosophy, the animating principle of friendship. Austen concentrates on the courtships or the discovery of the partners, tests their suitability for each other, adjusts their circumstances in the way Rousseau tells us is desirable (particularly in relation to property and social status, as well as such questions as good looks), and marries them off, presumably to live happily ever after. It is remarkable how little she concentrates on children. There is no discussion of any desire of the partners to have children and to dedicate themselves to rearing them. It is as though Elizabeth and Darcy were to spend the rest of their lives alone together in endless conversation, sharing their intelligence and wit with each other. This is their low-key response to the emptiness of the lives of all the other persons and represents the best of all possible worlds once one has lived out the superficial excitements that preoccupy most people.

Throughout, Austen's heroines are uncompromising about the necessity of woman's chastity and modesty if a serious attachment is to be possible. The apparently shameless Stendhal and the reserved Austen both insist that real connection requires the total cooperation of sexual desire. There is no possibility in their view of a woman's "dealing with her sexuality" in casual or multiple ways and still having the energy of soul left for sublime love. This impossibility is not presented by either moralistically but simply as fact. Elizabeth cannot contain her contempt for those women who give themselves for merely prudential reasons or out of lust, not because she has to resist such temptations, but because sexual desire is of interest to her only insofar as it contains her highest aspirations. It is a woman's responsibility to decide and choose well. She is praised and rewarded for choosing well, blamed and punished for choosing badly. This is the practical arena for her responsibility and the action of her real

freedom. Conventional morality may make use of woman's subjection for the sake of stability, but her capacity to deal successfully with the challenge of relationship to men naturally depends on her reserve or self-control. It is precisely the disproportion between male and female that makes this necessary, and in her sober but charming way, Austen affirms the dialectic of *amour-propre* powered by sexual desire that Rousseau insisted was the way to establish profound human connection.

The curiosity of this permanent conversation of friends is that the two partners must be good-looking and that their bodies must be aroused by and attracted to each other. This requirement is unimaginable when one thinks of the intense intellectual sharing between two persons of the same sex, as friendship was traditionally characterized. What does the sexual attraction do to the conversation or the conversation to the sexual attraction? This romantic friendship could be understood as a kind of idealism in which the whole self is engaged without the separating out of the elements that friendship used to require; or, it could be understood as a hardheadedness that, not trusting in the self-sufficiency of the spiritual, gives it an anchor in the body and its passions. In Aristotle, there is a part of man directed to sex and the family, another directed to citizenship, and a third directed to friendship and knowing. They are each distinct and each requires its satisfaction and entails certain duties. The task of the serious person is to give these three elements of a serious life a rank order and subordinate the less important to the more important. For Aristotle, the friendship of shared discourse is the highest thing to which everything else must be subordinated while receiving its due. In Romantic love, friend, lover, father or mother of one's children, and fellow citizen are all the same, and no act of subordination is required. This is a charming and tempting solution, but does it work, and does it give each of the elements its proper due? One cannot help remembering Aristotle's remark that the orgasm and thinking are mutually exclusive.<sup>7</sup> There is no reason why a human being cannot do both, each in its proper time. But if you have a single partner, do you choose him or her primarily for the former or the latter, or on the basis of some compromise? If someone were to say that instead we have to have two partners, one for each of these two great activities, then we are still confronted with the question of which of the two is primary. Those who do not want to face this question are sticking their heads in the ground and will be unable to "know their priorities." This choice depends upon an elabo-

rated view of what is most important. The questions I have just raised may seem inappropriate in a discussion of the austere Jane Austen, but they are necessary precisely because she, unlike the other Romantics, seems to celebrate classical friendship as the core of romantic love.